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# “Put My Thang Down, Flip It and Reverse It”: Black Women’s Interstitial Languages of Body and Desire

Mecca Jamilah Sullivan\*

*The repositioning of women in language occurs when we reverse, interrupt or dismantle the cultural mythologies which position women in language . . . when we challenge how the feminine in language is addressed. It may therefore include reducing the language to its barest and most elemental, or it may access other modes of articulating or even other languages.*

Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*

*Language, when it finally comes, has the vigor of a felon pardoned after twenty-one years on hold. Sudden, raw, stripped to its underwear.*

Toni Morrison, *Love*

*Is it worth it? Let me work it. I put my thang down, flip it and reverse it.*

Missy Elliott, “Work It”

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## 1. Interstitial Language and the Problem of Intersectionality

The archive of invented languages in black women's literature is as expansive as it is undertheorized. While many critics have considered the place of African oral traditions and coded language in African American literature, few have examined the importance of invented language systems in black texts, and none have done so with regard to black women's texts in particular. Zora Neale Hurston's use of "Alphabet" as a nickname for her protagonist on her quest toward economic, sexual, and emotional self-fulfillment in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Alice Walker's conception of "different" languages to describe how Celie talks with her sister across boundaries of nation and sexuality in her 1982 novel, *The Color Purple* (264), Harryette Mullen's extended poetic excavations of the potentials of reformulated English for critiquing gender, race, and class in *Sleeping With the Dictionary* (2002), and poet M. NourbeSe Philip's recasting of language as "foreign anguish" in her 1988 volume of poetry, *She Tries Her Tongue, Her Silence Softly Breaks* (44), all demonstrate how secret languages, new vocabularies, and unforeseen systems of speech figure prominently, if quietly, in black women writers' race and gender critiques.<sup>1</sup>

For black women writers, invented languages are a crucial means of exploring the formal possibilities of intersectionality and for forwarding new models of black female identification, community, and belonging. Focusing on Toni Morrison's novel *Love* (2003), Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Fucking A* (2001), and Missy Elliott's hip-hop single "Work It" (2002), I argue that invented tongues, recast idioms, and imagined systems of speech enable black women writers and artists to wage important critiques of gender, sexuality, and erotic desire while mobilizing those critiques to forward models of black female intimacy rooted in difference. I term these systems *interstitial languages* to describe invented idioms that provide language for speaking what Hortense Spillers calls "the missing word—the interstice" of black female sexuality and alterity, "which allows us to speak about and that which enables us to speak at all" (156). By speaking difference in new tongues, these artists write, project, image, and imagine the "missing words" of black female otherness as a legible, inescapable fact of their texts, inviting—and, in some cases, requiring—readers and viewers to navigate racialized sexual difference as their characters and speakers experience it. Exploring interstitial language across these three forms—fiction, theater, and hip-hop performance—allows us to understand better how contemporary black women writers use subversive poetics to 1) express intersectional identity and complicate it by

articulating the often underacknowledged differences among black womanhoods; 2) forward models of black space and community shaped by the nuances of black female difference; and 3) engage in dialogues about intersectionality and black female erotics in pop cultural spaces beyond academic and literary audiences.

I use the concept of interstitial language to describe imagined, shared linguistic systems developed by black women writers and their characters, first to express the nuanced interconnections of deviant sexuality, intimacy, and desire in black female experience, and, second, to situate the site of intersection as a space for creating intimacies rooted in black female otherness. I borrow from Spillers's notion of the "interstice" both to emphasize the specific rearticulation of black female sexuality in particular and to signal its conceptual relation to the trope of the "intersection," through which Kimberlé Crenshaw and many others have read the broader complex interplay of difference in black women's experience. The interstice provides a means of theorizing intersectionality specifically through a lens that approaches sexuality and desire as linguistic engagements, allowing us to return intersectionality to its protodiscourses in black feminist literary and humanistic studies.<sup>2</sup> This essay thus focuses on two major types of interstitial languages: those that operate at the interstices of English language reading practices and new linguistic forms unintelligible in terms of Standard English morphology; and those that operate at the interstices of the spoken and the silenced within the English language (and/or other dominant Western languages), using the morphologies and vocabularies of those languages in nonnormative ways and explicitly claiming those reconfigurations as new language.

Interstitial languages extend the narrative and dialogic multiplicities through which black women writers have long challenged dominant models of alterity.<sup>3</sup> For Geneva Smitherman, "language plays a dominant role in the formation of ideology, consciousness, behavior and social relations; thus contemporary political and social theory must address the role of language in social change," and interstitial language therefore offers a corresponding political possibility for literary studies. By destabilizing dominant languages and centering black women's intersectional experience on new tongues unfamiliar to Standard English language readers, these writers change the imagined worlds they write about *and* the intellectual landscapes their readers inhabit. In doing so, they make space for new interpretive practices by foregrounding multiple forms of alterity in the poetic and linguistic properties of their texts (94). These writers construct what Mullen refers to as "heteroglossia[s] for collaborative reading," in which the interplay of multiple linguistic registers allows—and *instructs*—readers to make critical contact

with intersectionality through “the flavor of difference in language” beyond English (xi).

For black women writers, the problem of English is the problem of intersectionality. Writing in English means creating through, against, and beyond a multilayered discursive system of social and structural silencings in which accepted notions of correct speech coalesce with normative conceptions of race, gender, class, and sexuality to render black womanhood unspeakable on all fronts. As Spillers and others point out, this silencing is a problem not only of discourse, but of language. Marcyliena Morgan describes two key assumptions about the gender dynamics of black speech that shape the terrain of normative language in Western anglophone culture: first, that both the use of “varie[d]” English speech modes (as in code-switching) and the more general ability to demonstrate verbal dexterity are “linguistically male” phenomena reflective of a specifically patriarchal social power, and second, that for black women, both speaking multiple languages and speaking *at all* are deviant acts (xiv).<sup>4</sup>

In this context, black women who speak multiple Englishes and combine those Englishes with languages of their own invention to speak desire engage freely in an ultimate linguistic deviance. They reject the constraints of normative language and normative sexuality, using sexual deviance as a point of departure for rearticulated social worlds. Interstitial language thus instantiates on a linguistic level the radical erotic and bodily “wildness” through which black women’s novels and other cultural texts express a “self-authored sexual desire and radical Black female sexual subjectivity that purposely incorporates that desire as the context for rebellion from the beginning” (Stallings 3). These languages demonstrate that the textual beginnings of rebellious black female sexual expression can precede even the structures of narrative and genre, often occurring in the very lexicons, grammars, and morphemes through which black women writers set sexuality to speaking.

Reading for black women writers’ interstitial languages permits access to the far reaches of the “sites of suggestive silence” where, according to Aliyyah I. Abdur-Rahman, “scenes of acknowledged discursive or representational impossibility” reveal “unabashed” and unsanctioned expressions of black sexual life in literature (28). Attention to interstitial languages builds on these and other recent explorations of black women’s erotic expressivity by demonstrating black women writers’ efforts to subvert norms of embodiment and desire through the poetics of language and creative form. Where Abdur-Rahman analyzes the erotics of silence as resistance in slave narratives, I extend this approach to consider how unintelligibility and untranslatability function as modes of both

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communal pleasure and intersectional critique for black women writers and characters in the twenty-first century.

While black women writers have used their poetics to interrogate racialized and gendered sociopolitical experience for centuries, the emergence of a sustained, public dialogue on intersectionality in black women's intellectual and cultural spaces in the latter third of the twentieth century inaugurated new modes of identity theorizing in black feminist literary cultures. The last decade of the twentieth century was particularly dynamic in this regard. Crenshaw's coining of the term "intersectionality" in 1989 to describe the simultaneous experiences of race, gender, and class oppression that black women face was followed by the publication in 1990 of Patricia Hill Collins's foundational *Black Feminist Thought*, and several other contributions by Collins, bell hooks, and Jill Nelson, among other black feminist thinkers explicitly concerned with reaching and engaging black women audiences both within and beyond the academy.<sup>5</sup> These works all marked fertile ground for new modes of black feminist literary engagements with intersectionality at the turn of the millennium.

Each appearing between 2001 and 2003, Morrison's, Parks's, and Elliott's texts use a poetics of interruption consistent with larger trends in twenty-first-century black experimentalism, in which aesthetic variegation complicates the stability of the black subject and emphasizes alterity. As Anthony Reed points out, many contemporary black experimental poets "use techniques associated with the mass media . . . within a dense network of détourned poetic techniques to trouble and reconceive ideas of voice and identity, emphasizing the moment of self-expression as a moment of self-othering" (98). This literary and linguistic self-othering has been a central concern of intersectionality theorizing since long before Crenshaw coined the term. Morrison, Parks, and Elliott exemplify this twenty-first-century black aesthetics of linguistic reconception, which they put into conversation with black feminist thought to enact a specifically intersectional "self-othering," expressing what Mae G. Henderson terms "the 'other' . . . within" black women's simultaneously racialized, gendered, and erotic selves (24).

Interstitial languages enact these critiques both within and beyond the text. While they create modes of deviant identification, self-articulation, and belonging for black female characters, they also operate on affective scales of sensory pleasure and epistemic discomfort for readers and viewers, highlighting black women's erotic diversity in different ways, for different audiences. For readers who live and experience black womanhood, interstitial language occasions familiar interpretive acts that echo pleasurably the erotics of those desires and confirm them as a set of shared experiences,

inscribing characters, authors, and readers in a nonnormative community of black-girl belonging. Conversely, for those without lived experiences of black female otherness, interstitial languages challenge them to engage the discomfort, intellectual work, and the relative powerlessness of untranslatability and unknowing required to think seriously about black women's lives.

Interstitial language is thus crucial for black literary studies both for what it *means*—for signifying black women writers' poetic critiques of racialized gender, sexuality, and difference—and for what it *does*. By carving intimate textual space for black women's erotics and requiring others to labor for access to black womanhood, these languages invert long-reigning power paradigms, dislodging linguistic authority from its usual loci and placing it in the hands and mouths of black women and girls.

## 2. "Ush-Hidagay": Interstitial Intimacies in Toni Morrison's *Love*

The play of language in *Love* illustrates the potential of interstitial language for facilitating subversive intimacies in black women's fiction. Like many of Morrison's novels, including *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Beloved* (1987), *Paradise* (1998), and, later, *A Mercy* (2008) and *God Help the Child* (2015), *Love* explores intricacies of connection and selfhood among black American women through a heteroglossic narrative structure that deftly probes characters' interiorities through both first- and third-person narrative. As in these other novels, *Love* uses a poetics of multiplicity to express the psychic and affective lives of women learning to live with, relate to, and love one another in a world where power is defined exclusively by either sexual or hereditary attachment to men.

For the young protagonists of *Love*, navigating this world's gender and sexual complexities requires interstitial language. Despite the identity-defining power of patriarchal affiliation in *Love*, the relationship at the center of its narrative is the lifelong friendship between Heed and Christine Cosey, respectively, the wife and granddaughter of Bill Cosey, the patriarch of the black coastal resort town where the novel is set. Heed and Christine articulate their intimacy through "idagay," a linguistic system they develop in childhood (before the 11-year-old Heed marries Bill Cosey) and use throughout their friendship to discuss sexual life and the erotic capacities of the body. Idagay is, as the narrator describes, their "private code . . . for intimacy, gossip, telling jokes on grown-ups" (188). Through this language, they create a private space in which to explore themselves, their sexualities, and the world around them as



they come of age. Idagay facilitates a linguistic and bodily closeness; through it, the two girls "shared stomachache laughter, a secret language, and knew as they slept together that one's dreaming was the same as the other one's" (132–33).

Based on English vocabulary and sentence structure, idagay is defined by a reconfigured phonic and syllabic pattern in which English root syllables are split at the first vowel and appended with the first consonant and the tag "idagay": "rent" becomes "ent-ridagay"; "you" becomes "ou-yidagay," and so on (188). Idagay reflects both the formal properties and the underacknowledged sociopolitical importance of what Kyra Gaunt calls black girls' "playful speech." While often dismissed as "so-called nonsense language," these forms, which include common "pig Latin" linguistic systems, are constantly in conversation with the racialized, classed, and gendered sociopolitical registers of black girls' lives (89).<sup>6</sup> In the case of idagay, the social is indistinguishable from the formal. The disruption of the legible English root word—and the insertion of black girls' "nonsense" into meaningful language forms—equips black girl speakers to create a private linguistic space designed exclusively for intimate exchange of sensation and information as well as a discursive, imaginative respite from the larger social landscape, where their bodies are constantly made available for male consumption.

Yet as much as interstitial language facilitates intimacy in the novel, it also allows black women to explore intersectional power differentials between themselves. For Heed and Christine, the most meaningful of these differences are those of class status and economic mobility—differences that, for black women in the novel, operate primarily through the sexual economies of marriage. While Christine is born as heiress to Cosey's earnings, Heed comes from the poor "Up Beach" section of the town, where "every woman's obituary could have read 'Death by Children'" (104). Heed's marriage to Bill Cosey thus marks a prepubescent entry into sexual objectification and erotic experience, and also marks a substantial class ascendancy. For Christine at least, these class differences are best exemplified in the two women's differing relationships with language. She constantly uses her command of Standard English grammar to assert power and primacy over Heed, particularly in contests for Cosey's affections (134).

As the two women navigate the sexual and socioeconomic dynamics of patriarchal affiliation, idagay serves a dual function. It acts as a metaphorical system of opposition to the legal and social schemas of heteropatriarchal marriage, offering them, as the narrator puts it, both "privacy" and "choices" with which to explore sexuality in a nonmasculinist linguistic context. Yet idagay also enables



Christine and Heed to create a space in which differences between black womanhoods may be voiced. We see this differentiating function of idagay most clearly at the novel's midpoint, when the two girls slip into it during an argument over Cosey's affections. Refusing to accept Heed's complicity in her newly consummated marriage, 12-year-old Christine shouts: "Ou-yidagay a ave-slidagay! E-hidagay ought-bidagay ou-yidagay ith-widagay a ear's-yidagay ent-ridagay an-didagay a andy-cidagay ar-bidagay!" ("You a slave! He bought you with a year's rent and a candy bar!") (129). Here, Christine uses idagay to comment on hegemonic structures of race, class, and gender as they connect with racialized enslavement and child sexual abuse, while at the same time designating Heed as deviant on all fronts. Idagay thus mediates a fraught in-group critique of black women's sexuality and power. Christine has internalized patriarchal codes of sociality in which women bear responsibility for various forms of abuse. This dismissal of patriarchal violence, along with a received cultural logic that resorts to "blaming a child for a grown man's interest in her" (147), allows Christine to claim social power over her friend, reifying her place as Cosey's favorite and affirming her legitimacy among the town's middle class. In the face of this power, Christine is unable to dislodge Heed's status as Cosey's juvenile sexual property from her perceived sexual deviance and availability as a poor "Up Beach" girl (145).

By presenting this argument through idagay dialogue, Morrison introduces Christine and Heed's experiences of class and sexuality through an epistemic struggle with the alien technologies of interstitial language. Readers are called on to navigate otherness as the black women characters experience it. Idagay is similar enough to English that the reader can train herself to understand it, yet making meaning of the language requires a concerted effort and a willingness to reread for its patterns and rules. Morrison thus asks readers to assume a "mnemonic responsibility," in which apprehending the language of the other requires "an intimate engagement with the history, context, and lineages of the speaking others' experiences" (Djebar 317). The reader's experience of the text shifts to accommodate the mnemonic unfamiliarity of idagay, requiring effort to understand black girlhood both *on* and *in* its own terms.

Yet this understanding is necessarily incomplete. Neither Morrison's characters nor her narrator translate idagay when it is first presented in the novel; translation is constantly deferred and embedded within Morrison's narrative. For example, although Christine calls Heed "a ave-slidagay" near the midpoint, only at the close does Heed partially translate Christine's exclamation, saying "Ave-slidagay. That hurt, Christine. . . . Calling me a slave" (188). By refusing to translate the rest of Christine's insult ("He bought

you with a year's rent and a candy bar"), Morrison leaves readers to develop their own literacy for grasping the relationship among enslavement, class status, and girlhood that the "year's rent" and "candy bar" signal. This incomplete translatability echoes the constantly frustrated nature of the sociopolitical aims of *idagay* itself. Just as the language cannot create a permanent space of power and self-definition for the girls, the reader can access only the language's epistemic signification, never the experiences that give those significations their meanings, textures, and social weight.

This untranslatability of black female intimacy is clearest at the end when Christine and Heed lie near death in the ruins of the Cosey resort. As they discuss the complicated, multiple forms of ownership and difference they have experienced together, the women return to *idagay*:

Well, it's like we started out being sold, got free of it, then sold ourselves to the highest bidder.  
 Who you mean "we"? Black people? Women? You mean me and you?  
 I don't know what I mean. Christine touches Heed's ankle. The unswollen one.  
 Sssss.  
 Sorry. . . .  
 Hold my . . . my hand.  
 He took all my childhood away from me, girl.  
 He took all of you away from me.  
 The sky, remember? When the sun went down?  
 Sand. It turned pale blue. . . .  
 Pretty. So so pretty.  
 Love. I really do.  
 Ush-hidagay. Ush-hidagay. (185–94)

Here the logic of *idagay* shifts onto the text's narrative strategy. Both quotation marks and dialogue attributions disappear, converting even the novel's Standard English into a defamiliarized language of difference. Because this conversation continues, unattributed, over the final 15 pages of the novel, the reader must approach the text with active attention to recognize which character is speaking. Yet this understanding is elusive as the two women's bodies and their voices merge. The pain Heed feels in her ankle becomes part of Morrison's polyglossia, represented in the onomatopoeic sound "Sssss," the sibilant note linking the physical experience of pain to the aural/oral soundscape of the narrative. When Christine hesitates to ask Heed to touch her, repeating the word "hand" in that request, she articulates the importance of comfort and sensual pleasure in

this embodied language of intimacy. The deferred request for touch gestures to the various tensions and desires that will find fulfillment in the women's simultaneous physical and verbal embrace.

Here Morrison exploits the full narrative potential of interstitial language. While Heed and Christine discuss the interconnectedness and indistinguishability of racialized and gendered structures of human ownership in their lives, their voices, too, become entangled inextricably. The distinctions between black and woman, wife and child, narrator and character, girlhood friendship and queer love are all effaced as Morrison's poetics lead the reader to decipher a new idiom of alterity. Readers experience both Christine's confusion and Heed's pain as they piece together a narrative of the countless identifications that, by turns, have both joined and distanced the characters, an effort which the narrator at once echoes and dismisses with the intimately coded imperative to "ush-hidagay." In the language of *Love*, black female intimacy, like difference itself, will not yield to normative grammars. Only in the spaces between recognizable sounds—in the imaginative territories of language remade—can the "missing word[s]" of black womanhood find expression (Spillers 156).

### 3. Staging "TALK of Sex": Spaces of Embodiment in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Fucking A*

When employed in dramatic writing and performance, interstitial language allows black women writers to interrogate intersectionality while asserting models of black spatiality defined by black female difference. *Fucking A* exemplifies this strategy. First produced in 2000 and published a year later, the play positions black women's bodies as subversive texts in quite literal ways, demonstrating how interstitial languages can center black women's erotic and bodily otherness in both the psychic experience of the reader and the material spaces of the stage. By mapping interstitial language onto performative and textual space, Parks configures the body as the very material out of which invented languages of sexual deviance are created. Constantly reimagining the spaces of the stage and the printed dramatic text, Parks uses these languages of black female embodiment to transform black speaking communities along the lines of black women's erotic difference. Interstitial language thus becomes a mode of expressing deviance, as well as a useful metaphor for the possibility of a black feminist model of black spatiality, collectivity, and diaspora.

*Fucking A* and its cognate play, *In the Blood* (2001), feature two versions of Hester, a black woman living in an undefined

geographical and temporal setting identified by the text's prefatory materials only as "Here" and "Now" (*Red Letter Plays* 4). The social landscape(s) of this setting evoke a constant sense of political upheaval, particularly in relation to cultural and state logics of race, gender, and sexuality. Like Nathaniel Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, these Hesters emblemize deviant female sexual autonomy within their communities and emerge as crucial figures in structuring public discourses on the subject. They reflect the state's "divergent fantasies" of what Lauren Berlant calls "the Utopian promises of collective identity" based, on the one hand, on spontaneous, ubiquitous virtue and, on the other hand, on the enticing regulatory powers of the law (Berlant 115, 61). Like Hawthorne's Hester, Parks's protagonists bear these indications of female deviance as a sign—in the form of graffiti and other textual markings on Hester's home in *In the Blood* and in the form of a letter "A"—for "Abortionist"—seared on her chest in *Fucking A*.

This linguistic branding symbolizes the constant connections among sexual deviance, bodily autonomy, and language in *Fucking A*. Language written *on* the deviant body becomes language written *for and through* the deviant body in "TALK," a coded, non-English linguistic system the characters use to describe issues of female sexuality, desire, sexual violence, reproduction, and embodiment. TALK incorporates elements of nine spoken languages, including English, Spanish, French, German, as well as those not readily associated with any known language. Glossed in the back matter of the text version of *Fucking A* and often projected onto the stage or distributed in pamphlet form during live productions, TALK requires the reader/viewer to constantly engage sexual and gender difference and to consider the role of language in those differences' construction.<sup>7</sup> By engaging in these acts of translation directly, Parks's audience negotiates "the threshold of the other" through multiple reading and viewing technologies (Djebar 317).

Like Morrison's "idagay," TALK is a specifically gendered, often erotic, language, reserved for what Hester's friend Canary calls "[w]omen things. Private women's things. Motherhood things. Things like that" (*Red Letter Plays* 213). These "private women's things" span a range of topics pertaining to female embodiment. For example, discussing the power-hungry white First Lady's inability to bear children, Hester and Canary depart from the play's standard vernacular English to describe privileged modes of white female embodiment, concurring, in TALK, "*Falltima Ovo ella greek Tragedy woah-ya*," translated in the appended glossary as "When her period comes she is in hysterics" (223). Likewise, when Hester approaches a female worker from the state agency from which she must buy her incarcerated son's release from prison, TALK becomes

a way of articulating power through sexual stigmatization, even between women. The worker refuses Hester's request, switching from English to TALK to condemn Hester as one of the town's many women who "*tee-tee kop fuh Binah Zoo*"—who "open their legs for anybody and everybody" (132, 224). Through TALK, the worker enacts a discursive disciplining of black female sexuality and black motherhood.

While TALK encodes cultural mores concerning women's sexuality, it also critiques the stigmas that it sometimes articulates and generates space for women to express erotic desire. Only through TALK, for example, can the First Lady boast, "*meh Kazo-say green-grass ee-sunny skies ee*" "my vagina is nice and pleasant" (128, 223). TALK also enables Hester to condemn state-sanctioned sexual violence against women, chastising one of the hunters tasked with apprehending and killing escaped convicts: "*Le doe-dunk eyesee Frahla ehle dunk seh Frala ah ma, Mister Hunter*"—"you force yrself on yr wife and then you send her to me, Mister Hunter" (146, 224).<sup>8</sup>

These dual valences of TALK—as a hegemonic language for removing undesirable elements of female sexuality from public discourse and as a radical mode of speaking back to sexual violence and state regulation—echo the broader conundrum of writing through the intersectional experience. For contemporary black women writers, the critical question in the development of a new poetics is how to create languages that fold the experience of multiple forms of oppression into the practice of cultural consumption without either overwriting or understating the limiting *and* liberatory properties of difference. For Parks, the solution is to permit both black *women* and black women's *bodies* to speak and to do so in a new language invented specifically for those purposes. Making clear the traumas and distortions that difference exerts on black womanhood in normative spaces, the body does the work that the voice alone cannot. TALK allows Parks's women characters to complicate otherness by speaking, as Hester puts it, "*Woah-yah dateh*"—"as if their vaginas were their mouths" (132, 225).

TALK is thus a means of sanitizing public space, yet it can be repurposed to create transgressive intimacies and communities rooted in women's sexual deviance. It produces a community of linguistic insiders defined by sexual and bodily difference, and it gives otherwise muted voices a forum for critiquing the discursive structures that silence them. These subversive and collectivizing functions of Parks's interstitial language are, perhaps, most apparent in the final scene, where Monster (Boy's adult manifestation) comes to Hester for refuge, claiming to be a friend of Boy's from prison there to deliver his belongings. Hester recognizes a scar that shows

Monster to be her son, but because of the precarious nature of black kinship ties in the town's carceral structures, she hesitates to acknowledge their relationship. Following his departure, she talks with Canary and the Butcher, Hester's male love interest, who "couldn't speak TALK to save [his] life" (225). The Butcher's complete lack of access to the TALK enables Canary to perform intimacy in the safe space of coded language:

Canary: <i>Jamah, Hester, jamah?</i>	Hester, what's the matter?
Hester: <i>Doh.</i>	Nothing.
Canary: <i>Jamah?</i>	What is it? . . .

This intimacy allows Hester and Canary to speak about embodiment and motherhood in explicit terms. Initially, Hester resists Canary's prodding, describing her interaction with Monster only vaguely and in English. Yet when Canary asks about Boy's belongings, Hester invokes the subversive potential of polyglossia, responding first in English, then rerouting the conversation into TALK:

Hester: A friend of his brought them by. <i>Le traja Scrapeahdepth woah-ya, C-Mary</i>	He had a very odd-looking scar.
Canary: <i>Scrapeahdepth?</i>	An odd-looking scar?
Hester: <i>Di.</i>	Yeah.

TALK empowers Hester and Canary to describe the kinship ties broken by both the town's penal system and the larger historical structures of difference-based oppression (most prominently, New World enslavement) that this system reproduces. By omitting the abbreviation of Canary Mary's name ("C-Mary") in the translation, Parks emphasizes the intimacy of TALK and its ability to create and facilitate difference-based bonds untranslatable in English.

Parks's refusal to make TALK fully accessible either to audience members or readers gestures toward the spatial possibilities of interstitial language. The visual rupture of the projected translations against the staged set (in the theater setting) and the cognitive and mechanical interruption produced by the turn from text to glossary (in the printed text) reinforce the bodily focus of TALK. The movements between English and TALK require the reader/viewer to navigate the plot through bodily actions—the shifting of the visual gaze from dark stage to lit projection or the manual turn of the page. The reader/viewer is called constantly to traverse the space between inside and outside, shifting her gaze up and down, turning the page

back and forth as Parks's characters "talk" their otherness onto stage and text.

With this transformation of space through interstitial language, Parks reconceives black spatiality and geography according to erotic deviance. The stage projections and appended TALK glossaries perform what Spillers characterizes as the "iconographic" work of the interstice; they provide disruptive epistemic evidence of black female sexuality on immediate sensory fields in "another country of symbols" existing at the interstice's "border" (156). For Parks, these borders map directly onto both the material space of the stage and the geographic spaces the stage represents: "[p]lays are about space, and [about] . . . strange people not connected to any one backdrop" ("Interview" 309). The text and stage directions of the play act as "the map of a piece of land. And what [Parks tries] to do is say there are 10 roads, 20, 50 roads—take one" (312). Parks's stage, like black global space, is both a complex geographical terrain defined by its innumerable paths to meaning and an affective gathering place of "[dis]connected" subjects defined by "strange[ness]" and a shared experience of alterity. It makes possible what Parks sees as an "otherworldly" space whose borders are shaped by black women's languages of difference (*Red Letter Plays* 111).

Access to this "otherworldly" space is delineated, first and foremost, by shared experiences of sexual deviance.<sup>9</sup> For Karla Scott, TALK acts as "formulaic speech," through which black women speakers "mark . . . identity with culturally-specific contextualization cues," thus using language to perform the expressly "social purpose" of marking shared experience (241). TALK names and also facilitates group identifications by orchestrating dialogic situations in which, as Scott states, "specific cultural knowledge is required for reference and understanding" of both black female sexual deviance and of the details of the plot (241). TALK thus provides multiple words and phrases for describing female sexual anatomy, including "woah-ya," and "kazo," both of which the glossary translates as "vagina." ("Woah-ya" itself has several meanings, also signifying "period" and "very," depending on its context.) The disambiguation of these terms requires the kind of insider knowledge Scott discusses—a "culturally-specific" familiarity with both the nuances of the language and the nuanced experiences of difference it speaks. Parks situates sexual deviance as a "cultural specificity," around which group identity can be organized. By projecting only partial translations onto the stage, she introduces the possibility of a black space shaped by the black female cultures of otherness that exclusively make such space legible.

In this sense, Parks's interstitial language is part of a crucial project of black feminist world-making. As Katherine McKittrick



puts it, this idiom forges "a conceptual connection between material or concrete spaces, language, and subjectivity [through which] openings are made possible for envisioning an interpretive alterable world" (xiii). For readers and audiences navigating Parks's interstitial language, such connections are conceptual *and* material, imaginable *and* lived. On both the page and the stage, she invites us to inhabit an "otherworldly" space in which black women's difference is definitive.

#### 4. "Flip It and Reverse It": The Poetics of Reversal in Missy Elliott's "Work It"

One widely overlooked site where such poetic world-making takes place is hip-hop music. Despite the recent attention hip-hop genres have received in Africana studies, performance studies, and gender studies, they have been considerably less prominent in literary criticism and in studies focused on black poetic form. Yet, as a language-based art defined explicitly by meter, rhyme, diction, metaphor, and storytelling, hip hop is central to discussions of late-twentieth- and twenty-first-century black poetics. Furthermore, as a genre dedicated to theorizing black life and experiences of race, gender, class, and sexuality—and to communicating those ideas for audiences across class lines—hip hop is crucial to any study of language and intersectionality in the contemporary milieu.

Black women's interstitial languages in hip hop demonstrate the importance of poetic form as a tool in popular intersectionality theorizing. Just as works more commonly acknowledged as literary (such as Morrison's and Parks's) use interstitial language to interrogate desire and identity on the page and stage, black women rappers' recoded languages reshape identification with and interpretations of black women's desire beyond literary audiences, theorizing complex black womanhoods in racialized and gendered public spaces defined by eroticism and affect, like dance clubs.

The prominence of interstitial languages in women's hip hop coincides with important shifts in rap genres at the turn of the millennium. As Reed suggests, the links between contemporary black poetic experimentalism and hip-hop culture are complex and multidirectional (98). In the early 2000s in particular, commercial hip hop moved away from both the linear narrative storytelling modes that characterized much popular rap of the 1980s and the deep regional identificatory emphases and sampling aesthetics of 1990s commercial hip hop. While much of commercial hip hop privileges masculine sexuality and coming of age, this shift in the genre's poetics made space for both new aesthetic practices and new articulations of black

female sexuality. Black women rappers since the late 1990s have catalyzed and redefined these shifts, incorporating coded idioms and deviant vernaculars into their poetics, particularly in discussions of sex. From Foxy Brown's signature coining of the phrase "ill na-na" to describe and claim desirable female sexual anatomy to Nicki Minaj's "Nictionary," a downloadable app translating her invented idioms of gendered intimacy and desire, interstitial language helps women rappers participate in the rigorous wordcraft that hip hop prizes, even as they wage and encode important gender critiques.

Rapper Missy Elliott's work in the early 2000s exemplifies this linguistic play. Through interstitial language, she shifts hip hop's heteroglossic formal tropes and its concerns with black gender and sexuality, rearranging them to introduce new methods for interpreting and identifying with black female eroticism.<sup>10</sup> Exhibiting how invented language complicates black female sexuality, "Work It" (2002), the lead single from her double-platinum fourth studio album, *Under Construction*, touches on the place of black women's erotics in sexual and intimate relationships. Using an imperious tone and language as explicit as any of Parks's characters, Missy instructs an imagined lover how to please her. Elliott delivers the first two of the song's three verses as an imperative, making explicit erotic demands of both the ungendered sexual partners the speaker refers to, and, by extension, the listener, indirectly positioned as a figure in the narrative:

Gimme all your numbers so I can phone ya  
 Your girl acting stank than call me over  
 Not on the bed, lay me on your sofa  
 Call before you come, I need to shave my chocha  
 You do or you don't or you will or you won't ya  
 Go downtown and eat it like a vulture. . . .  
 If you're a fly gyal, then get your nails done  
 Get a pedicure, get your hair did. . . .<sup>11</sup>

Elliott devotes the majority of her verses to establishing an authoritative voice to claim her own sexuality and encourage female listeners to take up her conception of "fly" black femininity. Her use of the command form throughout indicates that she is not simply talking about sex but is speaking *to* an imagined listener whom she demands to engage her intently. Eventually, this address morphs, issuing a new set of affective impacts and interpretive challenges for the reader:

This the kinda beat that go bha ta ta  
 Sex me so good I say blah blah blah. . . .  
 Listen up close while I take you backwards

[Played in reverse: *Watch the way Missy like to take it backwards*]

I'm not a prostitute but I can give you what you want. . . .

Is it worth it? Let me work it. I put my thang down, flip it, and reverse it.

[Played in reverse: *I put my thang down, flip it and reverse it. I put my thang down, flip it and reverse it.*]

Eschewing Standard English and recognizable black dialects, Elliott reconfigures language to demand both sexual pleasure from the object of the speaker's attention and "close" hearing from listeners. She first develops an onomatopoeic linguistic form to connect the quality of the "beat" to her own expressions of sexual pleasure, as we hear in the rhyming echo of the "bah ta ta" of the beat and the "blah blah blah" of the speaker's expression of erotic satisfaction. This language then gives way to an auditory morphological system unintelligible to the English-speaking listener, as the line "watch the way Missy like to take it backwards" is heard in reverse, a strategy later repeated in the hook's closing line: "I put my thing down, flip it and reverse it." Elliott's commands here take on more guttural, onomatopoeic, and, ultimately, unintelligible forms that echo the body's own languages of pleasure, using black female ecstasy as a vocabulary through which to offer a language beyond language that makes both sensory and intellectual demands of the listener as they sit (or dance) with her difference.

Given the substantial speculations over Elliott's sexuality and her longstanding refusal to disclose her sexual identification, this signifying practice carries particular meaning as an expression of sexual deviance. Often rumored to be lesbian in hip-hop magazines and blogs while linked romantically to female artists, like Keri Hilson and rapper Sharaya J, Elliott has long been the object of what C. Riley Snorton terms "rumormongering about black celebrity sexuality." Such speculation "evinces a set of logics that presume that one can apprehend the 'truth' of identity through the visual and thus that increased surveillance of a public figure will bear more accurate results" (135).<sup>12</sup> By referring to "the way Missy like to take it backwards" in reversed sound, Elliott sidesteps the visual hegemonies of sexual surveillance by expressing "backwards" desire and pleasure through reconfigurations of sound. She draws attention instead to her (or her speaker's) relationship to a complex, potentially multidirectional, sexual pleasure, linking it to the sonic complexity and linguistic multiplicity of her music. As the speaker issues explicit directives regarding her sexual pleasure, the phrase "I put my thing down, flip it, and reverse it" is played repeatedly both forward and backward, requiring listeners to adapt new listening technologies as they engage the song's transgression of appropriate female

sexuality. “Backwards” sexual pleasures and sonic/erotic “reversal” converge as the speaker convenes a broad range of sexual deviations, including queer and anal sex, along with broader social “reversals” intrinsic to the sonic event of a black woman speaking in tongues as she commands her own pleasure.

By reversing the reader’s listening practices, Elliott trains her audience to listen for—and experience—the difference in her erotic self-expression. Her interstitial language of reversal constitutes a linguistic and lyrical instantiation of what Stallings thinks of as black women’s literary tradition of “trickster-troping,” a “non-heteronormative act of tactically joining orality and sexuality . . . to create a folk-based discourse of desire” (10). For Elliott, the facts and objects of sexual desire can be communicated in intelligible English, yet the contours of queerness and the feel of desire defined by deviance cannot. Her linguistic play of queer commands, sexual flipping, and erotic reversals emphasizes experiences of alterity on various levels. In the midst of the song’s otherwise highly singable hook and verses, groups of listeners must pause in the middle of the hook, unable to sing the line that completes the chorus’s foundational rhyme scheme.

The strategic trickery in this move has different effects on different listeners. Elliott’s interstitial language of reversal emphasizes variation as part of the listening experience and thus stimulates corresponding sets of affects for her listeners according to their relationships to the black female erotic voiced in the song. For some listeners in public or club settings, the dissonance between familiar and unfamiliar linguistic modes highlights the experience of outsider status, requiring them either to perform the intellectual labor of researching the song’s lyrics to translate the reversed lines or to navigate their estrangement and the relative powerlessness of unknowing. Yet for groups of listeners familiar with Elliott’s erotics and hip-hop poetics more broadly, this interruption of rhythm and rhyme creates a dissonance that prompts a collective experience of pleasure—a shared laugh at the unintelligibility of the line and at the impossibility of singing the rhyme or translating it into recognizable language. This pleasurable powerlessness invites a shared communal recognition of Elliott’s creative genius. The dance, the beat, and the melodic timbres of the lyrics themselves communicate more about the “worth,” the “work,” and the transgressive multidirectionality of black women’s sex than Standard English ever could.

By critiquing sexual politics through the sensory and structural modalities of invented linguistic systems, interstitial languages emphasize the bodily and erotic complexities of black women’s sexual acts and experiences. They highlight the affective and sensual registers of black women’s creative expression and textuality, just as they emphasize the erotic dimensions of language itself. Speaking

intersectional experience in new tongues, artists like Morrison, Parks, and Elliott render the "missing words" of otherness an undeniable fact of their texts. They demonstrate how simultaneous experiences of racial, gender, and sexual difference come to bear on black code-switching practices and point to a tradition of black feminist poetic and linguistic innovation that has yet to be fully explored. Through their invented lexicons, these writers provide new linguistic means for overwriting the linked grammars of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, reconfiguring the languages in which stories of black womanhood can be told and provoking the world to listen differently.

### Notes

1. After decades of thwarted communication with her sister, Nettie, Celie, the protagonist of Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*, imagines: "maybe, like God, you changed into something different that I'll have to speak to in a different way" (264).
2. Recent critiques have suggested that intersectionality is an inadequate framework for understanding the performative and processual dynamics of identity within a contemporary global context. These critiques have situated intersectionality primarily within sociological and historical paradigms emerging out of Crenshaw's critical race and legal studies framework. Yet the foundational works of black feminist writers and artists highlight intersectionality theory's emergence from a humanistic intellectual tradition in which the interrogation of political experience is inseparable from artistic imagination and linguistic play. See, for example, the Combahee River Collective's foundational 1977 "Black Feminist Statement," which emphasizes the importance of cultural expression in black feminist critique (273–74). "The Combahee River Collective Statement," *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (1983), edited by Barbara Smith, pp. 272–82.
3. See Mae G. Henderson, "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the African American Woman's Literary Tradition," *Changing Our Own Words: Essays on Criticism, Theory, and Writing by Black Women* (1989), edited by Cheryl Wall; Dale Peterson, "Response and Call: The African American Dialogue with Bakhtin," *American Literature*, vol. 65, no. 4, 1993, pp. 761–75; and Dorothy J. Hale, "Bakhtin in African American Literary Theory," *ELH*, vol. 61, no. 2, 1994, pp. 445–71.
4. In prevailing Western cultural logics, as in dominant sociolinguistic discourse, black women are, as Marcyliena Morgan argues, "viewed as linguistically male in terms of outspokenness, dialect variety, etc. . . . [which has] led to the argument that the speech of the 'regular' [black] male is the same as the 'regular' [black] female . . . who had no virtue" (xvi). The notion of a black women's language system is thus doubly deviant, first in its expression of a "virtue[less]" identity, and second, in its explicit distinctness from what is accepted as "'regular' black [male] speech."
5. For Kimberlé Crenshaw's coining of the term "intersectionality," see Crenshaw, "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics," *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989, pp. 139–68.

6. In her analysis of the popular black girls' hand-clapping game "eeny meeny pepsadeeny," Gaunt translates the refrain "atchi catchi liberatchi" as a phonetic reconfiguration of "education liberation," reflecting black girls' absorption of rhetorics of black sociopolitical reform of the 1980s and their rearticulation of those discourses through their own creative linguistic systems (89). The popularization of black male-authored pig Latins (as in rapper Snoop Dogg's late 1990s tag phrase "fa shizzle, my nizzle"), and the commercial co-optation of such idioms by white media and corporations (such as Wrigley's, which used the term "fa shizzle" in its 2002 Eclipse gum campaign), indicate the various usages of black invented idioms in both the negotiation of the politics of black self-expression and in the commercial marketing of blackness.

7. Parks's stage directions call for "nonaudible simultaneous English translation" of TALK (*Red Letter Plays* 115). The appendix of *Fucking A* also includes the lyrics and sheet music to several original songs that appear throughout the play. These songs constitute another important level of the play's heteroglossia.

8. TALK also bears some morphological resemblance to German. "The abortion," for example, is translated as "*die Abah-nazip*" (117). This syllabic parallel between the homonymic relationship of Parks's "die" and the German word for "the" renders the TALK phrase at least partially legible to English speakers with any basic familiarity with German language. Similarly, the capitalized *A* of "*Abah-nazip*" further conveys the term's meaning and hails the polysemous *A* marking Hester's body.

9. Parks's English dialect, too, redefines the stage as a space reshaped by a multiplicity of black female difference. Parks omits linguistic signifiers of possession, replacing them with signifiers of plurality, such that "Hester's Home" reads instead as "Hesters Home," and "Hester's place" becomes "Hesters place" (*Red Letter Plays* 157, 205). Here Parks's polyglossia revises historical languages of both race- and gender-based oppressions with the same sort of complex social poetics through which TALK wages its critique.

10. Hip-hop culture symbolizes public deviance in both Morrison's and Parks's texts as well. Morrison's narrator describes gender dynamics in contemporary African American culture as a landscape of women "straddling a chair or dancing half naked on TV," invoking hip-hop videos to paint a world in which contemporary black women have, as she puts it, no "secrets," either "to hold" or "to tell" (4, 3). Parks similarly invokes hip-hop culture as public transgression, offering a list of criminal offenses punishable in *Fucking A*'s fictional setting that includes "playing loud music" and "fighting the power," a reference to rap group Public Enemy's controversial song "Fight the Power" (1990), condemning police and state violence (*Red Letter Plays* 160).

11. "Gyal" signals Elliott's affectation of a Caribbean accent in this line. "Chocha" likewise tags Spanish-language slang for vagina. Here, Elliott further complicates black female gender by briefly invoking feminine attractiveness in specifically Caribbean diasporic contexts.

12. See Allen Starbury, "Keri Hilson, Missy Elliott Rebuke Lesbian Relationship Rumor," *BallerStatus*, 18 Mar. 2011, web; and Sonya Magett, "Miss Elliott Gay Wedding 2013: Wed Rapper Sharaya J? Friend Reacts [EXCLUSIVE]," *Enstars*, 26 Sept. 2013, web.

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